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ABSTRACT

Understanding the contexts of adolescents' worries can provide valuable information to improve the adolescent's well-being. This study compared the worries of Caucasian adolescents and minority adolescents (Native American, African American, Hispanic American, and Asian American). Over 2,300 high school volunteers participated. Student worries were measured by means of a list of 29 issues, including personal, family, peer, and personal. Results indicated that minority status and gender have effects on adolescents' worries. Minority adolescents were more likely to worry than white adolescents, and female adolescents were more likely to worry than males. The most frequently reported worries were grades, graduating from high school, relationships with parents, and looks. (Author/EV)

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Contexts of Adolescent Worries : Impacts of Ethnicity, Gender, Family Structure and Socioeconomic Status

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study intends to examine the contexts of adolescent's worry. Since worry symbolizes a person's mental status and life contexts, a better understanding of adolescents' worries will provide insights for researchers and practitioners. Understanding the contexts of adolescents' worries can provide valuable information to improve the adolescent's well-being.

This study compared the worries of Caucasian adolescents and Minority adolescents (Native American, African American, Hispanic American and Asian American). 2,369 high school volunteers participated in this study. The results of this study indicated that minority status and gender have effects on adolescents' worries. Minority adolescents were more likely to worry than white adolescents and female adolescents were more likely to worry than their male counterpart. The most frequently reported worries are Grades, Graduating from high school, Relationships with parents and Looks. Implications for school, family and policy are also presented.

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INTRODUCTION

ADOLESCENCE: AN UNIQUE STAGE

Due to the acquisition of advanced cognitive ability, adolescence is the first time that individuals are able to foresee, contemplate and worry. Abstract thinking, hypothetical thinking and better perspective taken are just three of the many exciting advanced cognitive abilities that adolescents acquire. Compared to adolescents, children are less likely to worry due to their cognitive limitations. Adolescents are able to think about the possible future, to engage in abstract thinking, to understand experience life in a broader contexts and to be more intra-perspective and inter-perspective.

WHY DO WE WORRY ABOUT "WORRY"?

Not all worries are harmful. For example, worry may cause anxiety, but anxiety may enhance performance. Worry involves advanced thinking about possibilities, adolescents that never worry may be at greater risk due to the view of invulnerability.

On the other hand, worry is frequently the prelude of distress. Past research has found a positive relation between worry and other problems such as low self-esteem, depression and suicide. Worry represents the mental status and the life contexts of a person. For example, a person who worried about being abused, may be in danger of being abused.

GOALS OF THIS STUDY

This exploratory study intends to examine the contexts of adolescent's worry. Since worry symbolize a person's mental status and life contexts, a better understanding

of adolescent's worries will provide insights for researchers and practitioners. Understanding the contexts of adolescent's worries can provide valuable information to improve adolescent's well-being.

Since the most studies have concentrated on White families, there is little information available about the contexts of worries among adolescents with various ethnic background. The present study investigated the topical areas of adolescent's worries. In addition, the relations between worries and ethnicity, gender, family structure and socioeconomic status were also explored.

METHODS

Sample

Two thousand three hundred and sixty nine 9-12th grade (49% females, 51% males) adolescents volunteered in this study. Data of this study is a subset of a larger study which contains data from six public high schools in a rural northwestern state.

Measures

Student worries: Student worries was measured by a list of twenty nine issues including personal, family, peer and future. This measure requires that the respondent report how much do they worry about the stated issues (0=not at all, 4=very much). Sum of the items was calculated.

Demographic variables: There were also questions concerning one's ethnicity (White, African American, Asian American, Hispanic American, Native American) , gender, father's education, mother's education, family structure and age.

Procedure

A passive consent form was sent to all parents (guardians) prior to the survey administration date. The majority of students were given about 30 minutes to complete the survey in classroom settings.

RESULTS

Post hoc comparison suggested that there was little variation within the four ethnic minority groups on the worry scale. However, a significant difference was found between White and other ethnic groups on their worries $F(1,3)= 29.08$, $p < .001$). Compared with adolescents from other ethnic groups, white adolescents were less likely to worry.

Table 1: Reported Worries by Ethnic Groups: Means, Standard Deviation and Significance

Worry Item	Minority	White	T Test
Grade	2.70 (1.08)	2.74 (1.04)	N.S.
Pressured into sex	0.91 (1.29)	0.92 (1.20)	N.S.
Get along with parents	2.24 (1.44)	2.09 (1.41)	2.00*
Poverty in the U.S.	1.78 (1.36)	1.63(1.22)	2.20*
Poverty and Hungry in my community	1.90 (1.28)	1.67 (1.14)	3.60***
Not fitting in	1.42 (1.44)	1.54 (1.33)	N.S.
Drugs/drinking in my family	1.49 (1.46)	0.83 (1.29)	4.42***

Good job after high school	2.15 (1.49)	1.90 (1.43)	3.52***
What to do after graduation	2.35 (1.46)	2.23 (1.39)	N.S.
Body growing normally	1.55 (1.49)	1.23 (1.39)	4.26***
My look	2.20 (1.28)	2.23 (1.25)	N.S.
Nuclear war	1.29 (1.44)	1.08 (1.27)	2.97**
Being sexually abused	0.85 (1.45)	0.57 (1.13)	3.92 ***
Being physically abused	0.95 (1.45)	0.65 (1.15)	4.27 ***
Too fat	1.35 (1.52)	1.18 (1.45)	2.28*
Too thin	1.41 (1.46)	1.31 (1.41)	N.S.
Get pregnant or get someone pregnant	1.41 (1.52)	1.15 (1.41)	3.43***
Pressured into drinking/drugs	0.94 (1.36)	0.95 (1.23)	N.S.
Get along with people of other races	1.26 (1.58)	0.88 (1.30)	4.95***
Being discriminated against	1.47 (1.53)	0.44 (0.96)	14.34 ***
Getting STD/AIDS	1.79 (1.54)	1.60 (1.40)	2.46*
Being left alone	1.19 (1.39)	0.90 (1.17)	4.29 ***
Loss of parent (death or divorce)	2.09 (1.59)	1.82 (1.43)	3.34***
Parent's fight	1.54(1.54)	1.20 (1.37)	4.46***
Enough money to get by	1.85 (1.46)	1.57 (1.43)	3.95***
Being accepted to higher education	1.97 (1.47)	1.95 (1.43)	N.S.
Afford higher education	2.10 (1.49)	2.11 (1.42)	N.S.
Being physically hurt by peer	1.09 (1.35)	1.02 (1.24)	N.S.

Note: * indicates $p < .05$; ** indicates $p < .01$; *** indicates $p < .001$

Participant's social economic status and family structure did not vary according to gender. Gender was found to affect the type as well as numbers of worries. Female adolescents reported more worries than their male counterparts $F(1, 3) = 87.83$, $p < .001$.

Table 2: Reported Worries by Gender: Mean, Standard Deviation and Significance

Worry Item	Boys	Girls	T Test
Grade	2.61 (1.08)	2.86 (1.01)	5.87 ***
Pressured into sex	0.75 (1.14)	1.01 (1.28)	6.76***
Get along with parents	2.08 (1.45)	2.17 (1.37)	N.S.
Poverty in the U.S.	1.39 (1.24)	1.93 (1.20)	10.68***
Poverty and Hungry in my community	1.44 (1.17)	2.02 (1.11)	12.18***
Not fitting in	1.37 (1.32)	1.66 (1.38)	5.27***
Drugs/drinking in my family	0.81 (1.26)	0.99 (1.41)	3.24**
Good job after high school	1.91 (1.48)	2.00 (1.42)	N.S.
What to do after graduation	2.18 (1.43)	2.35 (1.38)	3.00**
Body growing normally	1.26 (1.44)	1.35 (1.39)	N.S.
My look	1.94 (1.27)	2.52 (1.17)	11.58***
Nuclear war	1.03 (1.33)	1.23 (1.28)	3.59***
Being sexually abused	0.43 (1.08)	0.84 (1.31)	8.24***

Being physically abused	0.52 (1.11)	0.92 (1.31)	7.92***
Too fat	0.67 (1.14)	1.80 (1.55)	19.97***
Too thin	0.84 (1.19)	1.84 (1.47)	17.83***
Get pregnant or get someone pregnant	1.11 (1.36)	1.31 (1.52)	3.35***
Pressured into drinking/drugs	0.84 (1.24)	1.05 (1.27)	4.09***
Get along with people of other races	0.98 (1.39)	0.94 (1.36)	N.S.
Being discriminated against	0.64 (1.17)	0.69 (1.20)	N.S.
Getting STD/AIDS	1.54 (1.42)	1.75 (1.43)	3.54***
Being left alone	0.73(1.13)	1.21 (1.27)	9.77***
Loss of parent (death or divorce)	1.69 (1.47)	2.07 (1.45)	6.25***
Parent's fight	1.22 (1.40)	1.31 (1.42)	N.S.
Enough money to get by	1.49 (1.43)	1.77 (1.44)	4.85***
Being accepted to higher education	1.78 (1.43)	2.14 (1.42)	6.06***
Afford higher education	1.98 (1.43)	2.25 (1.43)	4.66***
Being physically hurt by peer	0.88 (1.20)	1.20 (1.31)	6.15***

Note: * indicates $p < .05$; ** indicates $p < .01$; *** indicates $p < .001$

DISCUSSION

Although excessive worry is not necessarily associated with mental health, worry is an universal experience and a part of life. However, worry symbolizes a need for resource and support.

Worry is frequently the first sign of distress, but it is frequently ignored due to the "stress and storm" stereotypes of adolescence. Second, worry reflects life contexts of adolescents and potential problems in their lives. Worries are frequently based on experience or one's perception of reality. For example, individuals worried about being abused may be in danger of being abused. A better understanding of adolescent's worries will provide many insights for intervention programs.

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